

A background image of three young people (two women and one man) looking at a smartphone together, overlaid with a blue gradient and a white geometric border.

A Parent's Guide to
SMARTPHONES

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“In short, if ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to look at your phone.”

– Catherine Price

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ❓ How have smartphones changed our day-to-day lives?
- ❓ What are some beneficial things about smartphones?
- ❓ What are potential harmful effects of smartphones?
- ❓ How have smartphones changed the way Gen Z has grown up?
- ❓ What does Gen Z think about smartphones?
- ❓ What are ways that smartphones have affected parenting?

The Door to Everything

One Saturday afternoon, your thirteen-year-old wants to go see a movie. The movie they want to see is fun, interesting, well-made, and educational. But it's playing at a theater in a part of town you're unfamiliar with, and when you get there, you realize that the theater is right next door to a combination strip club/casino/illegal dog fighting ring with a bouncer who is clearly ignoring IDs. Your kid promises that you can drop them off and they'll go right into the theater, and that they don't even know what a combination strip club/casino/illegal dog fighting ring is. The truth is, they might be a really good kid; but all kids are curious, and the lure of things they know they aren't supposed to engage with is often very strong.

You'll probably never face this exact scenario as a parent, but the internet is often very much like the scene we just described—and arguably poses even more of a danger. The internet has the potential to be an incredible tool for good, but it is also full of opportunities to dive into some of the darkest parts of humanity. And in our day and age, pretty much everyone in the world has instant access to all of this right in their pocket.

For an adult with good self-control, discipline, and awareness of the potential dangers, having a smartphone can be extremely useful. But for a teen, that much information, that many options for where to go and what to do all vying for their attention can often be overwhelming.

In this Parent Guide, we want to help you make informed, thoughtful decisions about when and whether to give your kids a smartphone. We'll talk about the good, the bad, and the ugly, and provide several opportunities for your own reflection as well.

What are the benefits of smartphones?

In the 1970s, when teenagers wanted to hang out with their friends, it was normal for them to tell their parents where they were going and when they'd be back. If they were gone too long, or their parents found out they weren't where they were supposed to be, there often weren't very many options. Since the invention of the cell phone, parents have been able to contact their children any time, and the now-ubiquitous smartphone [introduced software](#) that allows parents to see their kids' locations and get a notification when they arrive at or leave a certain area. [There are even apps](#) which allow users who feel unsafe to automatically call police and designated contacts at the tap of a single button, which can offer parents even more peace of mind about their children's safety. Some of these technologies have their downsides, which we'll talk about later, but there's no denying they can be incredibly helpful and even potentially life-saving.

Sherry Turkle, author and founding director of the [MIT Initiative on Technology and Self](#), says, "Technology is not good or bad. It's powerful, and it's complicated." We can't think of smartphones as moral or immoral. Content on the internet is mostly put there by people, and people can certainly do and say things that are morally right or wrong. But the way we use our technology is ultimately up to us, and we have to weigh the benefits and potential issues of having it in our lives.

Smartphones help make life more convenient, allowing us to quickly and easily pay a friend for dinner, get directions in an unfamiliar area, or snap some high-resolution pictures without the need for a bulky camera. Smartphones can make our commutes more interesting, or even inspiring or educational, with music and podcasts (like the [Culture Translator Roundtable!](#)) and can allow us to send fun and entertaining content to friends.

Smartphones have also revolutionized how we communicate. In 1927, when [the very first prototype of video chat](#) was introduced, it was deemed a "spectacular flop." Now, many people [prefer it to talking on the phone](#). Texting allows for immediate contact and rapid sharing of information (although [many people agree](#) this can also enable some of humanity's worst tendencies). Social media can create a way to [reconnect people](#) who haven't seen each other in years, or just let people feel that they're a part of the lives of loved ones who live far away. Despite the potential issues with this kind of connection, there's no denying that trying to live without it can sometimes

feel uniquely isolating. Our ability to interact with others across the globe is something previous generations could never have imagined.

Our society today is designed for smartphone use, and in some ways it can actually be difficult to navigate the world without one. From scanning a QR code to get the menu at a restaurant to EMTs automatically receiving a copy of your medical ID when you call 911, smartphones and society can work in tandem to make our lives easier, safer, and more connected. However, they do have the potential to be as dangerous as they are useful, so we'll address that in the next section.

Reflection questions: How have smartphones been helpful in your life? Do you think there are ways that smartphones have changed society for the better? What are they?

How can smartphones be harmful?

The greatest danger of smartphones is also their greatest strength: instant access to a wide range of information. Shelley Delayne, “Chief Mom” at the kid-friendly smartphone company [Pinwheel](#), talked with Axis about an experience she had Googling with her child. Shelley’s daughter had a project for school about koalas, and needed some fun pictures to add to the presentation. She typed “koalas” into the search box and went right to images. Unfortunately, this was during [the 2019-2020 Australian bushfires](#), and the first images to pop up were the burnt bodies of koalas who had been killed in the disaster. Fortunately, Shelley was with her daughter and was able to close out of the window before her daughter saw anything too horrific, but the incident goes to show how even the most innocent interaction with the internet can have potentially harmful results (Shelley and her daughter were able to get what they wanted with the search terms “cute cuddly *alive* baby koalas”).

On a more serious note, truly horrific and traumatizing information, as well as all kinds of videos and pictures are easily accessible with a smartphone. According to an article from [Fight the New Drug](#), as of 2020 80% of pornography was viewed on smartphones. On average, the earliest age children are exposed to pornography [is between 11-12 years old](#). The ubiquity of smartphones has made it so young children can access pornographic material on their own or be exposed to it by someone else in a matter of seconds. In May of 2020, a teacher friend of Axis noticed all her students had muted themselves and turned off their cameras during the lesson. She later found out from a parent that the students had spent the whole class time sharing pornographic videos via group chat.

In addition to sexually explicit material, there is also the potential of running across violent content. Even when it’s [not sought out](#), graphic violence is everywhere on the internet. For example, the Reddit group [r/FiftyFifty](#) features blurred out images, with a caption describing two possible things it could be, one benign, one grotesque. One of the less upsetting posts promises either “a really nice hotdog or a second degree sunburn.” Some of the posts, though, have the potential to seriously traumatize the viewer. Violent media, like sexual content, is easily passed around, and even if a person doesn’t have access to a smartphone, that doesn’t stop a coworker, classmate, or even a stranger from flashing them an image of something they don’t want to see.

A lot of this content is accessed on social media sites, but there’s more to talk about when it comes to social media. Comedian, director, and writer Bo Burnham discussed [the effects of social media and smartphones](#), saying, “That sort of sitting in your bed at the end of the day and having a

choice between every bit of information collected in the history of humanity, or the back of your eyelids...you have to choose between complete, complete oblivion, and everything." That sort of decision is overwhelming even for the strongest and most self-disciplined of us.

[According to NPR](#), communication on social media works against the way humans naturally interact with one another. We are wired to understand one another through conversations, self-revelation in relationships of trust, and communities based on participation in each other's day-to-day activities. Social media changes how we judge not only others' character, but also their value by creating measurables for likeability, popularity, and even authenticity in the form of likes, comments, and follows.

Access to the 24-hour news cycle, which we mentioned above as a potentially good thing, can also play a role in harming our mental health. Having constant awareness of majorly distressing news headlines at all hours can add to our stress in a significant way. What's more, when [one third of Americans](#) are getting information from sources they know to be unreliable, and [48% of people](#) are getting their news from social media, it's no wonder we're seeing so much misinformation, misunderstanding, fearmongering, and extremism.

There are also the physical problems smartphones can cause. The [blue light emitted by screens](#) suppresses the body's production of melatonin and tells the brain that it's time to be alert and awake, which (obviously) leads to less sleep. Constant [comparison with others on social media](#), [increased isolation](#) created by replacing in-person interactions with digital communication, and the [intentionally addictive design](#) of both smartphones and the apps they run (there's even a word for the fear of being without your smartphone: [nomophobia](#)) all contribute negatively to smartphone users' health.

Finally there is, as Shelley Delayne also spoke with us about, the "still-face" smartphones cause. The term comes from [a 1975 psychological study](#) involving a group of mothers and their infants. First, the mothers smiled at their children, laughed, baby-talked, and were overall expressive. Then they turned away, and when they looked back they did not interact with their babies, keeping a completely blank expression without speaking or responding to their child. The babies were responsive and engaged with their mothers when the mothers were expressive and focused on them. When the mothers kept a still face, the infants at first attempted to elicit emotion from their mothers, but after only three minutes they stopped trying, became silent, and even turned their faces and bodies away from their mothers. Shelley explained that smartphones replicate that still-face expression. When we look at our phones, the people around us immediately understand us to be disengaged, unresponsive, and uninterested, even if we assure them verbally that we

are not. And, as parents, our smartphones often encourage the same inconsistency as the mothers in the experiment did. Sometimes we are engaged with our children; listening, paying attention, responding to them thoughtfully. But sometimes we let our phones become a screen between us and our kids. That kind of inconsistency is confusing for our teens, and like the babies, there might come a point where they don't feel like it's worth it to try and get your attention.

Reflection questions: What are ways smartphones have negatively impacted your life? Have they had any negative effects on your family? How have you seen that play out?

How have smartphones affected Gen Z?

Gen Zers have been described as “[digital natives](#),” people who don’t remember a world without technology. While many Gen Zers were born before the widespread use of smartphones and may even remember a period of their childhood without internet access, most of them had at least some experiences with computers while growing up. [Gen Alpha](#), the generation born after Gen Z in 2010 or later, is the first generation to have never lived in a world without the [iPhone](#), which debuted in 2007. Gen Z’s whole lives have been and will continue to be shaped, and in some ways defined, by the omnipresence of smartphones.

That is not to say that Gen Z loves smartphones. Twitter user [@yungskuntebony](#) posted “Bring iPods back fr sometimes I just wanna listen to music n [sic] be away from this evil a** phone.” User [@blondiewasabi](#) (account deleted) expressed a common experience of many Gen Zers: “sorry I didn’t text back babe I was consuming 7 forms of media,” and user [@Kinetic42](#) summed up a widespread sentiment of the generation with the words, “Having unrestricted access to the internet is a curse.” And yet, according to [a 2019 Pew Research study](#), 95% of teens use, or at least have access to, smartphones.

In addition to making our lives more convenient, smartphones have also changed our day-to-day lives in such a way that they can be less comfortable without one. As implied in the first tweet above, [Apple discontinued](#) the last remaining version of its groundbreaking technology, the iPod, in May of 2022, making streaming on a smartphone the only easy way to listen to specific songs. [Some experts speculate](#) that digital wallets on smartphones will soon replace debit and credit cards in the same way that cards replaced checks and cash. [Paper maps are nearly obsolete](#), and you would be hard pressed to find a teenager who even knew how to read one. [Smartphone technology doesn’t work well](#) with “dumb phones” (phones without smart technology); sending images or creating group chats often overwhelms the simpler design of a phone without a “smart” operating system. This means that in some ways communication becomes harder for those who don’t want a smartphone themselves.

Though some teens are [embracing the smartphone-free life](#), many feel they are already in too deep, and that to try and give it up now would put them in a whole different world than 95% of their peers.

Reflection questions: How are your kids’ relationships with smartphones different from yours? In what ways was your childhood different from your kids’ because of technology?

What does parenting in the world of smartphones look like?

Parenting Gen Z and Gen Alpha in the world of smartphones can be a challenge. The majority of [Gen Zers are parented by Gen X](#), who were born between 1965-1980, and grew up not only without smartphones, but without the internet altogether. This creates a significant gap between the experiences of Gen Z and their parents. While many of the lessons we've learned (like how to apply for a job or manage a budget) are still valuable to pass on to our teens, there are huge parts of their world that we only got access to as adults.

Because most teens have smartphones, there is going to be pressure on our teens to have one too—and pressure on us to get them one. Being outside the norm has always been [a source for bullying](#) among kids, and with [93.4% of kids](#) getting their first smartphone before the age of 16, a teen without one is in a significant minority.

Even so, “everybody’s doing it” has never been a satisfactory reason for joining in. Just because all our kid’s friends might have smartphones doesn’t mean we have to get them one. We know our kids better than anyone else, and if having a smartphone isn’t right for them, then we should feel confident in making that decision.

That said, options are available to help bridge the gap between “no phone” and “fully adult phone.” As with all life skills that we teach our children, it is wise to model the behavior we want to see, then to be closely involved with them while they try it one piece at a time, and then to watch them as they grow to more independence with it. Sometimes, if one-on-one communication is the only priority, a [good old flip phone](#) and a prepaid cell plan can be a good idea, although it’s important to note that because flip phones have limited functions, there aren’t really options for parental controls, such as limiting contact lists or setting time limits on usage. For older kids, a smartphone with varying levels of filters or parental controls might work. Software like [Covenant Eyes](#) and [Canopy](#) provide accountability, content filtering, and restriction options designed to help the smartphone user have freedom within boundaries designed to protect them. That said, accountability and filtering aren’t perfect, and young people who are really determined can usually find a way around them.

There are also smartphones that are specifically designed with kids’ and teens’ needs in mind. [Pinwheel](#), the company we mentioned earlier, offers smartphones with a specially programmed operating system, designed to allow you to customize the phone to be the right fit for your child

based on their age, development, and needs. It allows you to control who your child can call and text and to customize that by time of day, decide if they can share images and with whom, and review all their text messages remotely. There is no app store on the phone, but you can add third-party apps to it from a curated library that gives you insights into what each app really allows before you say “yes” to it.

Whether you choose a tool that is designed specifically for the purpose like Pinwheel, or use another option, it is wise to start with the simplest and most limited digital environment possible and give them increasing independence and functions over time. It is far easier to give more freedom and responsibility over time than to take it away after things have gone badly.

Ultimately, only we can make the decision about what our kids need. Staying in conversation with our children helps them learn to use smartphones to develop skills like self-control and staying strong in the face of peer pressure. Instead of using smartphones as a way to try and make our teens behave, smartphones can actually be a conduit for creating a deeper relationship with our teens. Being honest and vulnerable about our own unhealthy habits with our phones is a wonderful way to create a relationship that lets your teen trust your decisions, even if they don't agree. It might even be an opportunity to let them hold you accountable with your own smartphone use.

Above all, like every aspect of our parenting journeys, we have to cover our kids with prayer. Praying for wisdom on how to talk to them about their smartphone use, for protection for them as they try to navigate a complicated technological world, for healthy communication and conversations that draw us closer together rather than push us apart keeps us engaged with our kids on a spiritual level, as well as an emotional and physical one.

Reflection questions: If you were parenting before smartphones became common, how has that changed now? What have you learned from other parents about smartphones, and is there anything you've heard that encourages you?

Hang Up and Hang in There

In [Matthew 28:19-20](#), also known as the Great Commission, Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Our commandment is to reach the world with the gospel of Christ, and for most of us, the world begins at home. Our greatest call as believers is to make disciples, and that goes for parenting too. We want to disciple our children well, preparing them not only to be healthy adults, but to love and pursue Jesus with all they are.

Smartphones can make that hard, because the Enemy wants our kids to believe in anything but the gospel, and smartphones are chock-full of access to voices whose only goal is to make that happen. But Jesus didn't say “behold, I am with you for a while, but once things get too complicated I'm out.” He said “behold, I am *with you always, to the end of the age.*” Nothing can change that. We don't have to pioneer parenting with smartphones alone. He walks with us every step of the way, guiding and leading us to teach our children of His goodness. We never have to be afraid that technology will make it impossible to parent our kids well. Jesus dwells in us even in the digital age.

Reflection questions: How have you experienced Jesus' closeness and care in the hardships of parenting? When do you find yourself turning to Jesus most in your parenting journey, and how can you practice inviting Him even more into your walk with your kids?

Axis partnered with Pinwheel to produce this Parent Guide!

*Pinwheel shares the belief with Axis that in the context of authentic connection with parents and caregivers, kids' use of technology can help them learn, connect with loved ones, and explore new ideas. Phones and personal technology are powerful tools that, when used appropriately, can achieve a lot of good in this world! When the time comes to get a smartphone for your child, we recommend Pinwheel as a tool to help your child develop digital literacy with your guidance. As a special offer to Axis followers, Pinwheel is generously offering a 15% discount on the purchase of a Pinwheel Phone! To take advantage of this offer, click the link below and use the code **AXIS15** at checkout!*

Learn More → <https://pinwheel.com?rstr=10113>

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